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AUTHOR Clemens, Sydney Gurewitz
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ABSTRACT

This article asserts that young children and their teachers benefit when they learn a work style that includes successive approximations before reaching a final product. These successive attempts can be thought of as editing, and the article describes how the Reggio Emilia approach offers patterns to help children achieve this style of work. The article discusses how a drawing done by a group of children offers an example of a task that can incorporate editing--through revisiting of what has been drawn, translation into other media or "languages," and development of consensus among the children on how to improve it. The article concludes that teachers should strive to free children from the burden of instant perfectionism so that they can instead develop skills in investigation, communication, and creativity. Contains 11 references. (Author/EV)

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Editing: Permission to Start Wrong

Sydney Gurewitz Clemens

Abstract

Young children and their teachers benefit when they learn a work style that includes successive approximations before reaching a final product. These successive attempts can be thought of as editing, and the Reggio Emilia approach offers patterns to help children achieve this style of work. A drawing done by a group of children offers an example of a task that can incorporate editing—through revisiting of what has been drawn, translation into other media or "languages," and development of consensus among the children on how to improve it. Teachers should strive to free children from the burden of instant perfectionism so that they can instead develop skills in investigation, communication, and creativity.

Making a Connection

As I watch teachers struggle to become teacher–researchers, and children struggle to represent their ideas in media, I see many possibilities for children to learn about editing. Documentation of teaching demands that teachers reflect upon their work. Here again, editing is a necessary part of that documentation.

A school-age child care project got me thinking about a connection between editing and Reggio Emilia theory. (Reggio Emilia, a city in northern Italy, is the home of what many people consider the best program in the world for young children ages birth to 6. More information can be found in the Reggio Emilia section of the ERIC/EECE Web site). The program's children, ages 5 to 9, made a glorious, sprightly, image-filled mural drawing of a rain forest. The idea came from one child who looked at a blank paper (about 30 inches by 70 inches) provided by the child care teacher and "saw" a rain forest. In this forest, more than a dozen children drew greenery, many creatures, and even a few people. Children returned to the drawing, adding to it, over a period of

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several weeks. Some images were begun by one child and finished or improved by another. Very large trees filled the vertical space, and an equally big, ferocious, and highly detailed alligator towered in the vertical space as well, parallel to the trees.

One Right Answer?. . .

When the project was well along, Peter, age 8 or 9, approached the children who were drawing. He told them they were doing a stupid job because they included a raccoon and a cat, neither of which lives in a rain forest. Peter was disdainful because the kids who had done the mural had gotten it wrong. This story, told by the teacher to a group gathered to consider ideas from Reggio Emilia, raised a question.

What if his teacher asked him to gather children who would be interested in making a second rain forest mural? He could use his information to help them represent the rain forest with its actual denizens. They might even attempt to draw the creatures to scale. Meanwhile, perhaps, another group of children might want to make a third rain forest, a rain forest that allows free rein to fantasy.

Or Many?

Documentation of these different possibilities would reflect what happens in the classroom. As appropriate assessment and documentation become topics of great interest to teachers, such representations would show the children thinking critically and representing knowledge as well as fantasy. The different murals could be displayed side-by-side and clearly labeled:

The Fantasy Rain Forest or Animals We Wish Could Live in the Rain Forest.

The Factual Rain Forest or Animals Who Really Live in the Rain Forest.

Individuals might want to select particular images from the first mural and import them (excerpted and reinterpreted) into new drawings. The first rain forest mural could become a bank of images (community memory) to be used in new and interesting ways and combined with images yet to come.

The teacher could create a photographic panel showing the evolution of the first mural into the subsequent ones, quoting some of the discussions that gave the impetus for more. Children could add explanations of the differences between the murals.

Translating into Other Languages

The work could continue in the single medium, or it could move on to collage or clay, paper maché, or other three-dimensional media, perhaps in a box or on a platform, or on a dirt base, with trees carved of wood.

Revisiting

Some children might want to edit their own work and produce another more refined or more daring work. Others, literal-minded like Peter, might enjoy editing the work of others, showing them their own ideas through a new filter.

Professional writers edit their own work, and they also use the editing expertise of others; both are necessary for excellent writing. The idea of editing can be useful in every one of the Hundred Languages. (The Hundred Languages of Children is a construct developed by the late Loris Malaguzzi to indicate the direction in which he wanted teaching to grow—from honoring only a few of the ways people communicate and represent their experience to honoring them all.) In Reggio Emilia, drawings are often photocopied and variations made upon the original drawing. A giant photocopier, if available, would expedite this mural work.

When I discussed where these ideas were taking me with the child care teacher whose work had sparked them, she told me about a child who wanted to make the rain forest dark. We considered how one might proceed to help this child think about making her idea visible: How about offering her a sheaf of colored papers, inviting her to draw or paint another rain forest on dark paper? Or introducing her to techniques of making a dark paper from whatever is around—washing on a coat of dark color? What about casting a shadow upon the rain forest—how could this be done? The fixed nature of the images on the first mural makes it hard to think about rearranging them, but they could be redrawn. Perhaps the child could trace or cut them out into separate images? These images could be tried against a background until a satisfactory result added to their impact.

Social Context

Although children had full control of the project, there were no (pervasive) stereotypical "action figures" in the rain forest drawing. In considering continuing with this work, some of us thought about schools we know with concentrations of more angry children. Alienated anger might be more apt to mar a mural with some such character. (The rain forest topic, of course, offers children many possibilities to draw predators and express their anger appropriately in school.) In such a volatile setting, we might also protect a group effort by having children create their images on other paper, cutting out and pasting ones they were pleased with onto the larger paper.

In this alternative, the community could discuss the images offered and either welcome them or ask that they be used elsewhere. (What is right for one picture may seem wrong for another. Questions of proportion or style might arise in this context.) This variant could lead to a discussion with the children about alternative ways of arranging the images to complete the mural. *How many images are needed? How close should they be? What about overlapping? Is something needed to unify the collaborative drawing? Let's try it this way. OK, but let's try it this way, also. I have an idea. We need another one of these. Could we photocopy it?* (The teacher interested in documentation will want to see Helms, Beneke, & Steinheimer, 1998; and Goldhaber, Smith, & Sortino, 1997.)

What Will the Teacher Choose to Do?

It is important to rise to Peter's challenge. His teacher says Peter is given to hit-and-run behavior. Why does he see this mural as a mistake? He knows what he knows about rain forests. His inclination is to censure the others, who are either less well informed or less given to literal interpretation of the theme, wanting to put their animals of choice with the other animals. We can see that he thinks the mural is presented as the only depiction

of the rain forest and that it's wrong.

It is not Peter's accuracy we question, it is his treatment of those who see in a different way. Opening his mind to others can become a research question, right there in the classroom: *If we offer him many views of rain forests, will Peter come to see the possibilities of conveying his valuable information without criticizing less informed or more fanciful children?*

I think Peter's perspective results from the disposition of many parents and teachers to offer information, which one learns so one can be right, at the start. (As if we knew what information would be useful to adults in the second decade of the 21st century!) We keep talking about learning to learn, but many of the same old approaches are being used in the name of education.

Editing Is a Particular Kind of Revisiting

If we do not teach children to edit, they end up attacking themselves and each other. They will expect us to be cruel to them, as well. We have all met children, as young as 3 or 4, who tear up their drawings and castigate themselves for their inadequacies and imperfections. We all know teachers who mark heavily in red, and parents who say, "You'll do it until you get it right!" Such practices burden children. We must work hard to avoid burdening children in this way, and we must work even harder to relieve the children already loaded with this constraint, overwhelmed by its weight.

There are a couple of directions in which we might go to free children of the burden of instant perfectionism, to help them edit. First, simply to reduce the waste of paper and the "trashing" of self, we could ask children to find ways to use their mistakes in their drawing. One teacher I know asks the children to turn their mistakes into flowers or insects. Another keeps scrap paper of all kinds in a box and has the children announce when they use scrap paper in their work—and then the class claps for that child. These techniques will work if the child is moving experimentally toward a finished product. Could the children draw the raccoon and cat into creatures who actually live in the forest? Would they have decided to do so, had the idea been raised?

On the other hand, if the error is caused by the drawing not living up to a standard in the child's head, if *translation* is the problem, then the flower-in-place-of-error or painting over or integrating the mistake are time-consuming side trips. The New Zealand author and teacher Sylvia Ashton-Warner knew about this problem. Appalled at the waste of paper by people learning to write—this was more than 50 years ago—she had the children use the chalkboard for drafts of drawings as well as stories and to take a sheet of paper when ready to make what the British (wherever we find them) call a "fair copy" (Clemens, 1996). Certainly, where spelling or detail counts, it is easier to fix on the chalkboard and get it just the way you want it before you commit yourself to paper or enter your work in your notebook. Many of us who use word processors are sure that we write better because we can correct and correct and never have to retype it all.

Getting It Right *Is* Important

I am reminded that there are situations where getting it right matters. One doesn't want to misread medicine labels or vote for the *other* guy. One wants to look for traffic in the

direction it will come from. But most of what is important to learn is about the work we do in learning. The process teaches us more than the data we have at the end. My whole undergraduate life at the University of Chicago was governed by the institutional idea that an educated person wasn't required to know facts, but to know how to get to those facts. And it is a basic belief of science that without a willingness to find oneself wrong, one is rarely able to discover something new. Peter is focused upon another of science's foundation rules: that we must habitually check our facts.

So most of what children are constructing in school can be approximated, and when we remember that idea, we assist the children in their building of concepts, dispositions, and skills. But we mustn't miss the chance to help them construct investigation and communication skills as the opportunities arise in such a project.

Editing Makes Things Better—But What's "Better?"

Peter *thought* he had the facts. He was wrong about cats, which do wander into even the tropical rain forest, and probably about raccoons in the *temperate* rain forest around Seattle. Do they live there? Does he know about rain forests closer to home? But they were facts, right or wrong, that could be checked.

If editing is to be a process of *improvement* and not just capricious change, there has to be some sort of consensus about what is better and what is worse. This consensus does not have to be absolute; in one context, good might mean "it rhymes," in another "the facts are true," in another "gender neutral." In art, it can mean "fulfills the author's intention" or "satisfies the eye/ear/sense of delight."

Investigation is needed here—and consultation. Good teaching helps children explore the creative space between the idea of objective, observer-independent excellence (needless here, even destructive) and relativism to the point of "whatever you do is right for you," which subverts all striving and all sense of accomplishment.

The "until you get it right" model presumes that "right" exists, and that children construct a matching "right" in their minds by being punished for missing it, rewarded for hitting it, until they can recognize it. That model is very depressing, but it has internal completeness.

The learn-to-edit model is far richer, and it asks the question of how "right" is to be constructed in the minds of the children. (Children in the plural, because the idea of consensus does seem involved here—in group projects like the rain forest picture or in a poem that is to be seen by more than just the poet.) Addressing this question helps children learn the tools of *finding out:* they can interview for consensus, and they can look up facts, learning to investigate first-hand (the difficulty of investigating rain forests first-hand may make them an inappropriate topic for such a project)—rather than staying with the intellectual flabbiness of "whatever."

"Right" needn't be an idea decided in advance, of course. Editing is partly a building of it. The Reggio shadows book (Malaguzzi et al., 1990) and the table measurement story (Castagnetti & Vecchi, 1997) are both at least as much about "How do we decide/agree what works?" as they are about "What is the answer?"

Editing Is What Writers *Do*

I learned to write in my late thirties (see Clemens, 1983, 1996). The most important and hardest thing to grasp about writing is that *you write it wrong at the start.* Then you change it a lot. Then you throw away most or all of it. If you repeat the process enough times, others will want to read what you have written and may even understand it. Few children of any age know that writers may write a hundred pages and keep just eight or ten. The lesson so often in school is to *get it right the first time.*

John Holt (1989) wrote about this process in *Learning All the Time*:

> Adults must use the skills they have where children can see them. . . . They should invite children to join them in using these skills. In this way the children can be slowly drawn, at higher and higher levels of energy, commitment, and skill, into more and more serious and worthwhile adult activities.
>
> When parents point out to me that their work is not as impressive in its progress as, say, that of a boat builder, I use my own work as an example. While writing is less easy to understand than the work of a carpenter or farmer, it is not necessarily opaque or meaningless to a child. Writing is a process that takes place in time. I begin with raw materials and scraps of notes, write rough drafts, correct them, change them, finally produce a smooth draft, turn this over to someone else for further editing, and see it go into galleys or some kind of proof sheets and eventually find its way into the finished newspaper, magazine, or book. Even if what I write about might not make much sense to children, they will surely be interested in many of the things I actually do. At every stage of the process outlined above, parents who are writers might show their child what they have done and talk a little (as much as the child wants) about what they are going to do next, and why. In the end, they could show the child their articles when they finally appear in print. They might even keep all their notes and rough drafts for a particular article, and on a big piece of cardboard paste up an exhibit showing everything from the first steps to the final product. This would also be an easy and interesting thing to do in schools; it would show students what none of them now know or could imagine—the amount of work that goes into serious writing. The books in the school are made things, made by people.
>
> It is this sense of *process over time* that children want and need to learn about, and much of this is visible in most kinds of work. Even if parents can't show children their actual workplace, they can show them similar places. For instance, for the child of a journalist, any small offset press would be fascinating: the noise, all those things going round and round, the paper flying out with stuff printed on it. A mystery! But children would see that a grownup understands it and controls it, and think that maybe someday, if they wanted, they could too. They would also learn that their parents did not think of them as too small and stupid to be included in a central part of their own lives.

Holt wrote before the Writers Workshop idea had entered American schools. Although a good idea, and one which meets some of my concerns about editing, it is unfortunately not nearly widespread enough.

"Affordances of the Medium"

Editing extends the flexibility of mind of those who struggle to get the thing said well,

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no matter what the medium. It is a way of learning by successive approximations. In his elegant analysis of the differential uses of media by children in forming and testing their theories, George Forman (1996) reminds us that building a structure in clay tests the possibility of that structure in a way that drawing it in markers, or even building it in cardboard, don't. He speaks about the "affordances of the medium," the capacity of each medium to represent with greater or lesser accuracy (see also Vecchi's article "Equilibrium and Stability" in *The Hundred Languages of Children*, 1996).

All creative processes include some form of editing. The creative process has its own requirements; school routines can be costly to it. Interrupting the flow can sometimes be deadly to a project. Keeping the work area tidy while making something is often unthinkable, but artists can usually cope with the idea of cleaning up after the project is done, or when it is at a plateau or stopping place. The teacher who tries to support creative work will be well advised to tolerate some sorts of disorder, and to be flexible about some schedule boundaries. Amidst all this editing must be readiness to edit the work plan.

If one is accustomed to editing, to painstakingly revisiting a draft to improve it by adding, deleting, transposing, decorating, simplifying, or translating it into the active voice, one has a method of examining one's life and work that can transfer into many areas. Just as using the next medium can bring insight, using the medium again—using a different perspective, attempting a different version of a task, trying to show a different audience—all can make the work more transparent to both the artist and the observer.

Kites and Poetry

After a wonderful excursion to the beach to fly a kite (for the first time in Daryl's life, about the fifth time in Grandma Sydney's), I showed him a poem, all printed nicely on my computer in large type and with graphics:

Kite Days

A kite, a sky,
and a good firm breeze.
Acres of ground
away from trees,
One hundred yards
of clean, strong string -
O boy, o boy!
I call that Spring!

Daryl, just 5 a week before, wasn't happy with the letters in the word "Days"—too close to his own precious name, invasive. We discussed this briefly, and I said something grownup about how the letters get used over and over in different words.

We read and joked and learned the poem and then I saw the need to clarify—"But Daryl, we weren't on acres of *ground*, you know, we were on . . ."

"Sand," chirped my good boy.

Let's change the poem, then, to say "Acres of *sand*."

He agreed, so I got a pen and crossed out *ground* and wrote in *sand*. Then he said,

"Grandma, let's change this." And he pointed to *Days*.

"How shall we change it?"

"Lets make it say, 'Kite Spring.'"

So we did. And then we went to the computer and fixed the whole thing up. And that's how Daryl learned to edit!

Kite Spring

A kite, a sky,
and a good firm breeze.
Acres of sand
away from trees,
One hundred yards
of clean, strong string -
O boy, o boy!
I call that Spring!

Editing the World

I think an editing curriculum would be just about the opposite of the spelling curriculum we all know, the one that begins Monday with 10 or 20 "new" words, imposes a series of rituals through the week, and ends Friday with a test that, averaged with all the test scores from all the other weeks, will determine one's spelling grade for the semester.

Process writing, as taught in Writers Workshop, assumes editing. But limiting the notion of editing to writing only is mistaken.

Learning to make successive attempts at one's task is useful for more than writing. Most of us edit our lives repeatedly, keeping the bits that accomplish what we're after and trying to introduce other bits that will work better than those that have failed us (see Freire & Macedo, 1987; Rodari, 1996). Letting children grow up thinking they *must* get things right the first time is cruel and deceptive. Even teaching them that they *can* get things right the first time is unfair. If getting things right were easily done, we would hand the children a world in beautiful, highly functional condition. Given the work that lies ahead of them, we must give the children our support and the freedom to do it *wrong* at first.

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Author Information

Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, an early childhood teacher for more than 20 years, is a recognized author, keynote presenter, and workshop facilitator on topics that involve "hot cognition": children learning through things they are passionate about. Her two books are *Pay Attention to the Children: Lessons for Teachers and Parents from Sylvia Ashton-Warner*, and *The Sun's Not Broken, A Cloud's Just in the Way: On Child-Centered Teaching*.

Sydney Gurewitz Clemens, M.A.
73 Arbor St.
San Francisco, CA 94131
Telephone: 415-586-7338
Email: teacher@slip.net
Internet: http://www.slip.net/~teacher

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